

A History of the Standard Copy*



A History of the Standard Oil Company*

*Continued

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“An Institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.”

— Emerson, in essay on “Self-Reliance”

(from the preface to Ida M. Tarbell’s “The History of the Standard Oil Company”)

I. A HISTORY*

*CONTINUED



It is now the year
2019. The Standard
Oil Company no
longer exists.



12-A



12-B



12-C



12-D



12-E



12-F

ExxonMobil is the central character of our story.

They represent the amalgamation of the formerly dissolved Standard Oil Company.



111-B

127-A

131-C

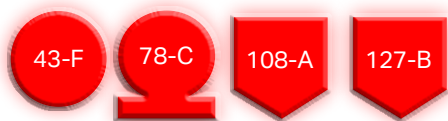
The Standard Oil Company, founded by John D. Rockefeller, needs hardly be introduced in this volume. Instead, please refer to Ida M. Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company*,¹ full text freely available online.

In 1911, the Standard Oil Company was dissolved. The Sherman Antitrust Act served as the catalyst for 20 years of legal battles that broke up the company.

1 Ida M. Tarbell was a pioneering investigative journalist who is largely responsible for the investigation of the Standard Oil Company that resulted in its eventual “busting” under the

Sherman Antitrust Act. For the full text of *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, please see The Internet Archive (archive.org). Cornell University Library provides the full text.

Standard broke into many fractured pieces(34), although truly broken in name only. These pieces remain economically enmeshed.





17-A



17-B

The two largest of these pieces were the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and the Standard Oil Company of New York. The former was to become the oil company Exxon, the latter, Mobil.





A man works on an Exxon sign, pre-Exxon Mobil merger, 1999. Date unknown.

This dissolution left a complex, though traceable, trail of corporate entanglement, through mergers, bankruptcies, and acquisitions.

The material traces of these entanglements persist as a series of linguistic and visual echoes: name changes, concatenations, revisions, and the logos and symbols that accompanied them.



22-A



22-B



22-C



22-D



22-E



22-F

The largest of these companies are the survivors, the hangers-on, gobbling up other small oil companies along the way.

108-A

115-A

123-A

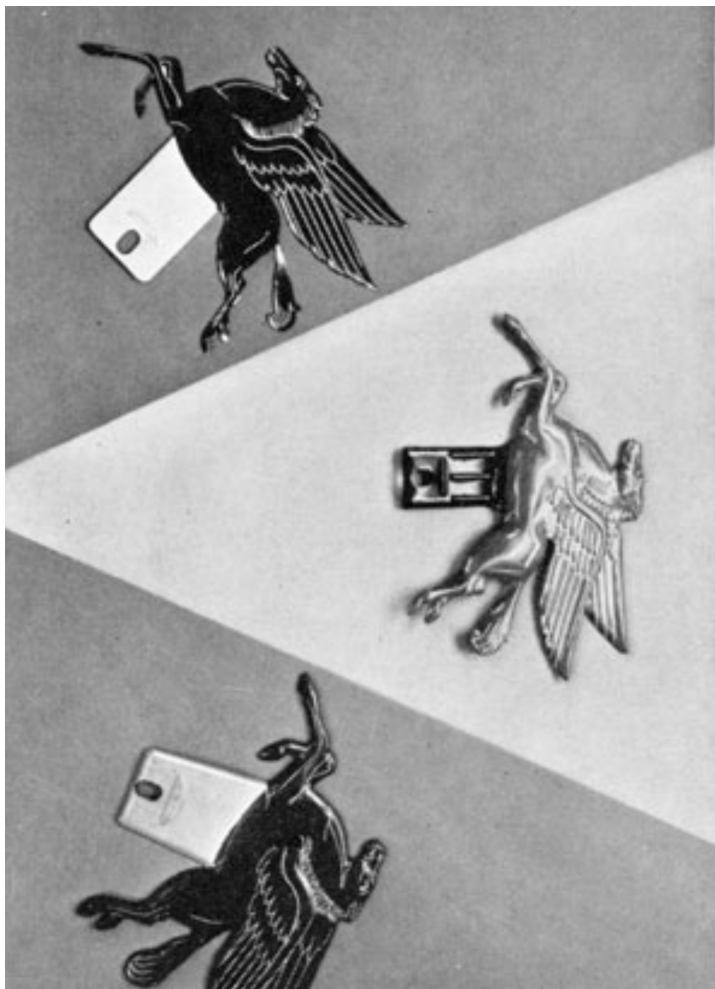
127-B

Note: There has been great effort made NOT to refer to neatly delineated corporate histories or logo “evolutions.” These are marks, nothing more, certainly nothing less.

The logos of these behemoths survived until the modern era of graphic design, undergoing comprehensive “rebrands” (in the case of Mobil) by the likes of Chermayeff and Geismar (see page 137).



It is the central role of a logo to mediate between an individual and the complex, amorphous entity known as a corporation.



These logos can project the values and associations of the corporation, or become wrapped up in public perception.

Most of the time they do both.



28-A



28-B



28-C



28-D



28-E



28-F

The logos of these oil companies are agents of obfuscation.

Oil companies are some of the most highly-structured, yet least transparent organizations in existence, outside the diamond-mining industry, that is.

Digging underground seems to shroud both these activities in a kind of mystery.

Maybe this is for good reason.



32-A

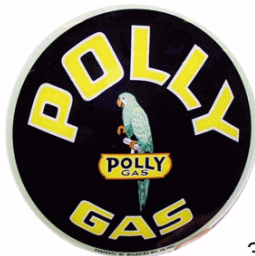


32-B

When the Standard Oil Company had reached its zenith of influence, it controlled all levels of petroleum extraction and refinement, including transportation. This practice is known as vertical integration.



34-A



34-B



34-C



34-D



34-E



34-F

One symbol stood in
between these multi-
farious activities and
the public:
The Standard Oil
Company logo.

There have been
many, of various
shape, size, and
likeness.



111-B



127-A



131-C

Before the turn of
the century,
Standard Oil used
as its mark a torch,
bearing a red and
blue stripe and the
word STANDARD.



127-A



37-A



37-B

It was likely stamped on barrels, painted on the sides of trucks, and put on display at petrol stations and refinery plants.

39-B



Barrels of valve oil with early Mobil gargoyle logos.

The public may have encountered this logo, or variations of it, hundreds of thousands of times, and in many contexts. But it's unlikely that this symbol helped explain or indicate what a person was looking at.



41-A



CALTEX

41-B



41-C



41-D



41-E



41-F

In fact, it's likely that it might have made it harder to look closely at the petrol stations, or wonder from where the barrels full of oil came.

It became harder to
see what was happen-
ing behind the torch.
Or rather, torches.

That is, the total monopolization of a number of petroleum processes by a single organization, and what that meant for the history of the world.



Socony Mobil Headquarters Building, 150 E. 42nd Street, New York.



46-A



46-B



46-C



Deepwater Horizon blowout, 2010.

II. IN MYTH AND LEGEND



Speaking of the history of the world, it's useful to look at photographs and written records of these corporations to understand the implications of their existence.



63-A

63-B

Magnolia Petroleum Company headquarters building at night, Dallas, Texas.

But it's also useful to look at the other traces they've left in their wakes: the linguistic and visual echoes of their corporate existence.



53-A



53-B



53-C



53-D



53-E



53-F

These are their names, logos, and symbols. They point to mergers, acquisitions, and bankruptcies. For corporations, existence and non-existence. They are tantamount to wedding invitations and gravestones.

They also point to a system of associations that largely remains a mystery to the public.



56-A



56-B

That is, the names and logos of these oil companies are rife with mythological and historical references, many of them drawn from classical Greek mythology.

Perhaps the most prominent of these is the Mobil Oil logo: a rendering of the mythological flying horse, Pegasus.



Documents in the Mobil corporate archives suggest that this symbol was chosen for its associations with speed and vitality.

CERTIFICATE OF REGISTRATION OF TRADE MARK, No. 3982.



'PEGASUS'



I, William de Neufville Lucas Registrar
of Deeds at Cape Town in the Province of the
Cape of Good Hope, do hereby certify that
"Vacuum Oil Company of South
Africa Limited" of Adderley
Street, Cape Town

was entered on the Register of Trade Marks, on
the sixteenth day of March, 1911, as
proprietor of the Trade Mark represented above,
for the Sale of the Goods enumerated on
the back hereof.

in Class 47—

Witness my hand and Seal of Office, at Cape
Town, this sixteenth day of March 1911 19

But many things
evoke speed and vitality. Many of these
things are real, in fact,
much more real than
a flying horse.²

² Mobil Oil, previously known as Socony Oil, was involved with early experiments in flight, including those of the Wright Brothers.

So why did a group of executives in early 20th century America choose a flying horse as a catch-all symbol for their petroleum products?

...



63-A



63-B



63-C



63-D



Mobil®

63-E



63-F

Argo Oil, fittingly, is based in Greece.³

The Argo is the mythological ship sailed by Jason and the Argonauts.



³ Argo Oil is a small oil company, and probably a subsidiary of a much larger corporation,

possibly BP, which has ties in the area. Its corporate lineage is not available online.

Known for its swift-
ness on the open sea,
its prow held a mag-
ical piece of wood
carved into the shape
of a woman.
She could speak to
the sailors.

A beam from the
Argo fell on Jason,
killing him.

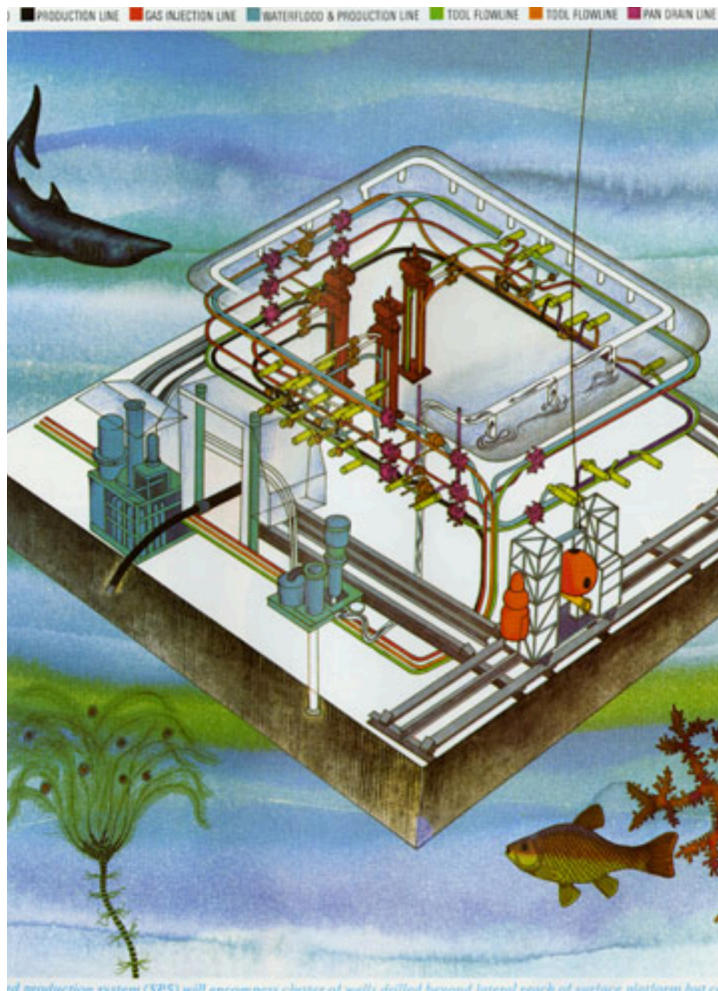
Argo Oil's logo
doesn't explicitly
indicate any of this
information in the
same way that the
Mobil logo does.

However, it's not unimportant to note that the shapes of the Argo oil logo evoke the sails on a boat.



Jason is a significant Greek hero, and the Jason myth is referred to a few times, by a few oil corporations.





Graphic illustration of proposed submerged production system, p. 29, The Lamp. Fall 1971.

Jason is, appropriately enough, one of the wickedest of the Greek heroes. He is motivated, at various times, by greed, power, possession, and glory. He isn't depicted as morally righteous in the same way as, say, Odysseus.⁴

⁴ This estimation of Jason's character is the considered opinion of the author.

There has been no official metric developed for the moral character of the Greek heroes.

In Homer's epic
The Odyssey,⁵
Odysseus is largely
motivated by his de-
sire to return home
to his wife and son.
His most horrific act,
the murder of his
wife's suitors, is de-
picted as a kind of
revenge on their
imposition.

The reader of
The Odyssey is for the
most part sympath-
etic to Odysseus and
his plight. It helps
that he's described
as clever, more so
than most of his
compatriots and
opponents.

5 See: one of the most recent
translations of *The Odyssey*,
and the first by a woman,

Emily Wilson's 2017 translation,
ISBN 0393089053.

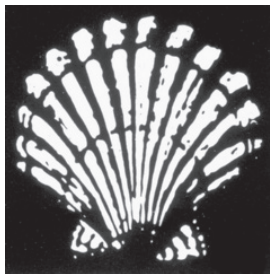
Jason isn't a hero
consistently cut in
the same mold.
His story is retold
variously, with
details changing
across texts, plays,
and accounts.
But he's hardly
described as clever
like Odysseus.



74-A



74-B



74-C

He is often accompanied by Medea, a sorceress who fell in love with him and helped him to accomplish his most famous heroic acts, including the rescue of the Golden Fleece.⁶



⁶ The capture of the Golden Fleece is Jason's iconic heroic feat.

Together, Jason
and Medea murder,
poison, and usurp
their way across the
Mediterranean.

Perhaps Jason is the
most appropriate
Greek hero to repres-
ent these companies'
products, after all.



Esso products, date unknown. Photo negative.



78-A

Mobil

78-B

ExxonMobil

78-C

Golden Fleece was an oil company operating in New Zealand and Australia. No doubt its name was a reference both to the treasured item of myth and to the populous herds of sheep for which New Zealand is famous.

17-B

56-A

Other references to myth remain buried. For instance, the designers of the updated BP logo report that the sun burst they designed was inspired by Helios, the Greek god who carried the sun across the sky each day in his chariot.

(Medea was also said to be a grand-daughter of Helios.)



115-F

To most people, the BP logo is an abstracted flower, or a reduced sun burst. After the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the BP logo became a target of increased satire and scrutiny for its obfuscatory⁷ qualities.



Offshore oil rig, location unknown.

It's one of the few contemporary oil company logos with an embedded reference to nature, darkly ironic in light of BP's environmental policies.

⁷ By obfuscatory, the author means that the Helios-inspired sunburst logo covers up the fact that what BP does is decidedly *unnatural*.

The mythological references embedded within these symbols extend well beyond the Jason myth. An early Standard Oil seal emblazoned with a torch is one example.



127-A

Mobil Oil Co.'s Hibernia offshore well, New Foundland, Canada.



The torch is key to the Prometheus myth: fire was the tool that Prometheus stole from the gods and brought to humanity. As punishment, Zeus chained him to a rock and let an eagle peck out his organs every day for eternity.

The subtitle of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is *The Modern Prometheus*. Perhaps Rockefeller saw himself as part of a lineage of Promethean figures, bringing forbidden knowledge to humanity.

37-B

133-F



Wright Brothers plane in field. Mobil (then Socony) oil powered initial flight testing.

First there was fire,
then there was
Frankenstein
bringing flesh back
from the dead.
And then there was
Rockefeller, refining
crude petroleum
into oil.

It has shaken the
world order in the
way the Greeks imagined
fire must have.

63-A

63-B

63-E


MOBILGAS
GENERAL PETROLEUM

General Petroleum Pegasus advertising on Market Street, San Francisco. c. 1955.

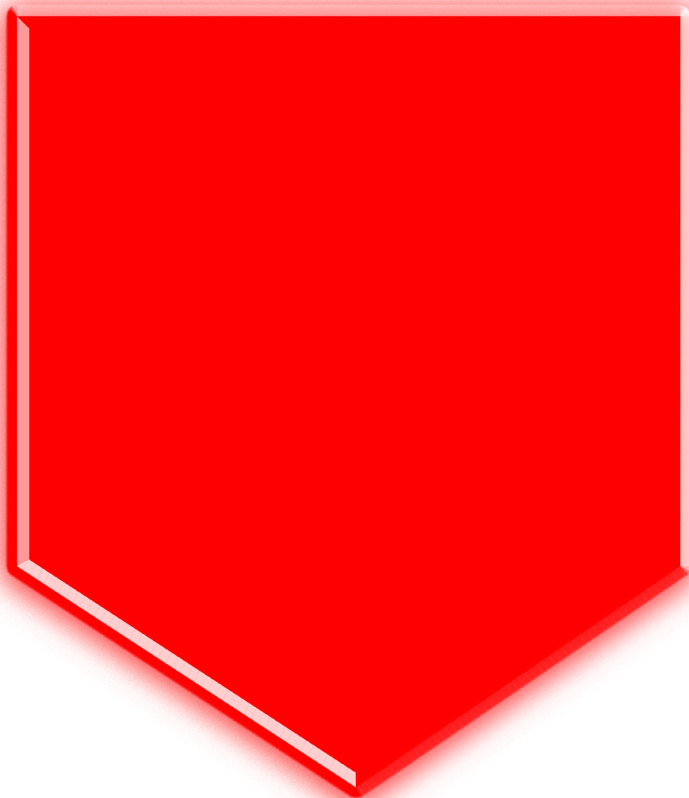
Beyond the names
and iconography,
mythological figures
continue to embed
themselves in the
fabric of these com-
panies at the level of
the everyday.

The name of the prospecting site at which the Deepwater Horizon explosion occurred? Rigel.

That's also the name
of the star that forms
the right foot of the
constellation Orion.

Another hero.

III. EMBLAZONED ON A SHIELD





98-A



98-B



98-C



98-D



98-E



98-F

It would be easy enough to tally up these instances of mythological reference to a kind of European cultural obsession with Classical Greece and Rome.

After all, our stars got their name before the oil wells did.

They're merely drawing on a long history of European cultural dominance, and the consequential dominance of European preoccupations.

There is, however,
a broader base of
embedded imagery
and references with-
in oil company logos,
outside the realm of
Greek mythology.



There are some clear but mystifying ties between these logos and medieval/heraldic imagery. One of the more obvious of these is the Mobil gargoyle logo.



Before Mobil adopted the Pegasus as their emblem(see page 58), for a brief period they used a gargoyle, for reasons unknown.

63-B



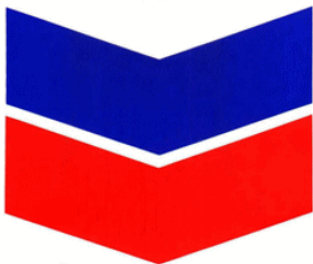
Mobilgas Pegasus neon sign.

The gargoyle is a strange corporate mascot. It is ugly, frozen, and monstrous. Gargoyles were sometimes carved on cathedrals to frighten off evil spirits, but more often than not, they were simply decorative downspouts to carry water

... away from the
mortar of the cathe-
dral walls.

It was a strange
choice for Mobil's
corporate symbol.

Chevron



108-A



108-B

The gargoyle, with its connection to religion as well as architecture, carries a kind of grave historical authority.

It's a curious observation that this Medieval-era monster was replaced by an even older, more fantastical mythological creature.
(Also a more visually attractive one.)





111-A



111-B

A whole category
of these logos are
based on the form
of the shield.

Some merely gesture at the shield or coat-of-arms as a form, while some feature corporate initials emblazoned on a distinct shield.

Four red shield-shaped icons arranged horizontally. Each shield has a white text label inside. The shields have a slight 3D effect with a dark red shadow on the right side.

108-B

111-A

117-A

131-D

The significance of the coat-of-arms or heraldic shield to the category of oil company logos is visually prominent.



115-A



115-B



115-C



115-D



115-E



115-F

Its meaning lies in the historical value of the coat-of-arms as a tool to delineate power: to mark the lineage of a noble family or individual. This power has been neatly transferred from families to corporations.

Some of these corporations have even clearer ties to the monarchy: Royal Dutch Shell, for instance.



It becomes easier to
imagine the world
as a feudal system
governed by a small
group of corporate
“noble families”
when framed in this
context.



Socony Mobil Headquarters Building, 150 E. 42nd Street, New York.

Chief among these corporations, in terms of oil companies that have survived the century of consolidation, is Chevron.

A red shield-shaped icon with a black outline and a slight drop shadow, containing the text "108-A" in white.A red shield-shaped icon with a black outline and a slight drop shadow, containing the text "127-B" in white.

The Chevron logo, widespread in the United States West and Southwest, consists of the obviously shield-like red and blue arrows. This mark evolved very directly from the Standard Oil mark of very similar appearance.



Chevron itself is the outgrowth of the Standard Oil Company of California. It is the Western colleague of Exxon or Mobil.



78-B



115-E



123-A



123-B



123-C



123-D



123-E



123-F

And the chevron, or *cheveron*, is one of the primary symbols of European medieval heraldry. It has also been found on pottery during archaeological digs in what was Ancient Greece.

The Chevron logo is two inverted chevrons, one red, one blue. It could, for all intents and purposes, be a simplified medieval coat of arms.

There's no doubt of
the relationship
between the
Chevron logo and
chevron name.



127-A



127-B

Mobil service station and convenience store at night, 1991.



But what about the relationship between the Standard name and the two inverted chevrons?

What prompted this choice, with the panoply of imagery available for a Standard Oil logo?

This question has much in common with the question of Mobil's pegasus logo: there are definite relationships but little transparency, little clarity to be had.⁸

⁸ The meagre corporate archives of major oil companies manage somehow to be both celebratory and vague.



131-A



131-B



131-C



131-D

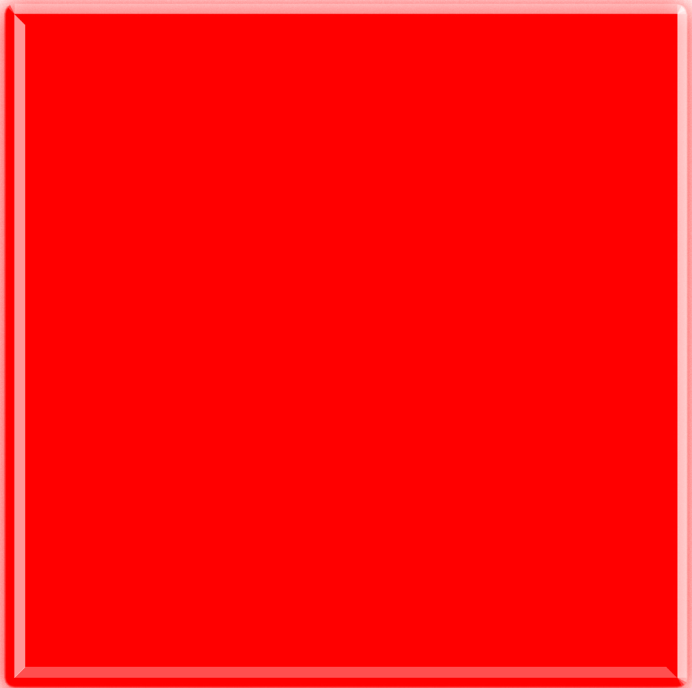


131-E



131-F

IV. CONCLUSION



ExxonMobil was born on the eve of the millennium, on November 30th, 1999. The merger of Exxon and Mobil was possibly given the green light by someone who assumed the world order might be upended by Y2K anyway.

This makes Exxon-Mobil the largest surviving remnant of the Standard Oil Company.

“Remnant” is an ironic term– the remnant far outsizes the original. The Standard Oil Company has in many ways been reborn.

Like the hydra, which,
once one head has
been shorn from the
body, grows three
more to replace it.



Red "O" sculpture at Mobil Fairfax, 1983.

This many-headed monster wraps around the globe, from ExxonMobil to British Petroleum to ARAMCO, the Saudi Arabian oil giant. They are all appendages of the same creature: Standard Oil.

The marks, names
and logos that pattern
this creature
point in many
different directions.

These logos oversimplify
an opaque
system of petroleum
production.

They serve to
obfuscate, to make it
harder to say what's
happening for sure.

*When all we have to
draw on is a symbol,
how much can be said?*



53rd Mobil Cotton Bowl Classic, Arkansas vs. UCLA, Dallas, Texas, 1989.

These are stony-faced gargoyles, winged horses, heavily-emblazoned shields.

In other words: these are fictional projections of power. They are stories, sculptures, and drawings.

These marks both
reference and
project images of
power from history
and myth deeply
embedded within our
social and cultural
awareness.

53rd Mobil Cotton Bowl Classic, Arkansas vs. UCLA, Dallas, Texas, 1989.



These images conceal the nature of oil company activities, but they also reveal: the origins, preoccupations and stories that these corporations rely on for power. These images are not randomly chosen— they contain meaning.

Perhaps we can turn to these myths for answers in the same way that our corporations have.

Standard Oil might be the hydra, growing heads as fast as we cut them off.

After Jason betrayed
Medea and left her
on an island, the
beam of his beloved
Argo fell on him.

*Wicked people get
what's coming to them.*

Of course, life is not
the stuff of myth,
and myth cannot be
relied on to guide
our thinking.

Wicked people very
often do not get
what's coming to
them.



But examining these logos, names, and symbols does offer new and useful ways of thinking about our corporations, and how they relate to us as feudal lords or as gods.

They manipulate our stories and myths in order to manipulate our imaginings of them.

Perhaps the manipulation of our myths should be handled by more thoughtful stewards. For now, though, we have a trove of corporate imagination through which to dig.

We will have to dig
deep, deep under-
ground.

One final
anecdote: the ‘M’
of Ida M. Tarbell’s
middle name?

It stands for Minerva,
the Roman goddess of
wisdom, and of war.



This book is based on Ida M. Tarbell's historic treatise *The History of the Standard Oil Company*. It is part of an ongoing publishing and research project which aims to continue Tarbell's research and situate it within the modern context of the evolved Standard Oil company.

A History... Continued traces, in the form of a short essay, the many oil company logos which are embedded with imagery derived from classical Greek mythology and medieval heraldry. These mythological and historic references are sometimes oblique or buried, but often overt paeans to the power of mythological gods or feudal lords.

The essay is accompanied by archival imagery, as well as an index of the many logos of oil and gas companies derived from Rockefeller's original company, Standard Oil .

Written, edited and designed by Madeleine Bruster in 2019.

Set in Lyon Text designed by Kai Bernau and Aktiv Grotesk design by Dalton Maag.

Images courtesy of the ExxonMobil archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, at the University of Texas at Austin. Logos were compiled from a variety of hobbyist oil industry memorabilia websites.



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the Standard
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*Continued